

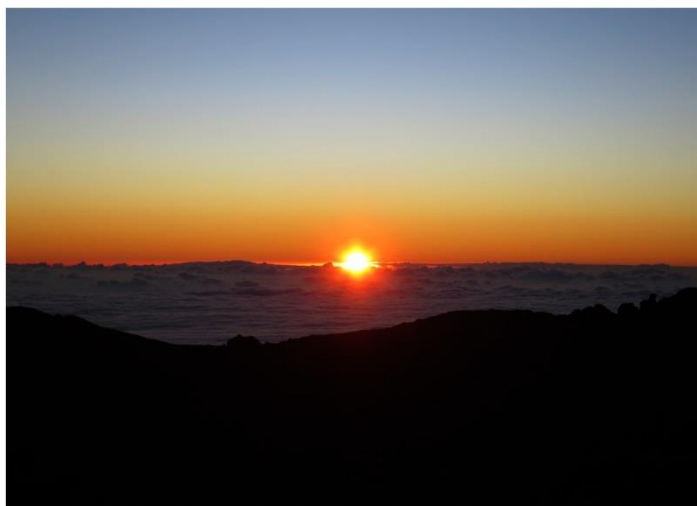
# Hiking Mauna Loa Trail to Summit and Back in a Day – January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015

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While planning my recent trip to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, I came across Gerad Dean's very interesting trip journal on the National Park Service website of his run/hike up and down Mauna Loa in a single day on January 13th, 2013, and decided it was a challenge I wanted to undertake myself. I wasn't going to run the majority of it like he did, but I was pretty sure it was something I could do in a day at my usual fast hiking speed. The trail is 19.6 miles (31.6 km) each way, 39.2 miles (63.2 km) round-trip and rises 7015 feet (2138 meters) from Mauna Loa Lookout to the summit. Those totals are definitely daunting even for a serious, fit and experienced hiker, especially considering the trail tops out at 4169 meters where the effects of altitude will become an issue for someone that that lives near sea level like I do (Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada).

Even more than the sheer length of the trail, I knew acclimatization to the altitude was going to be the biggest problem, especially given my experience day hiking up and down Mount Whitney the previous summer. I had hiked into the crater at Haleakala and back to its 10,023 foot (3055 meter) high summit earlier in the trip, but was staying at Kahului and Hilo right on the ocean at night. The day before I planned to summit Mauna Loa, I therefore checked in at the backcountry office and then drove up Mauna Loa Road at night and slept in my car at Mauna Loa Lookout (6662 feet or 2031 meters of elevation). It wasn't a very pleasant or comfortable sleep and was only a couple of hours, because I was up around 2:30 am to start hiking in the dark.

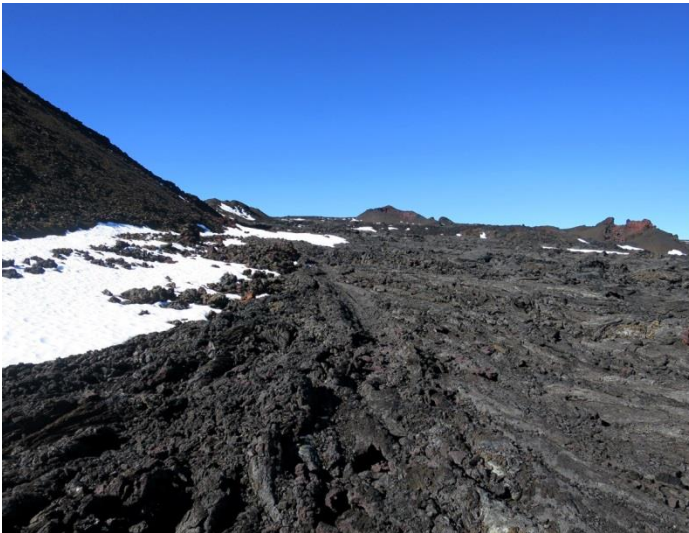
At about 3:00, I set off on the trail by headlamp equipped with hiking poles and a daypack filled with some extra layers, water, Gatorade, food and some emergency equipment in case I was forced to spend a night on the mountain. A moonless and cloudless night revealed an unbelievable field of stars further accentuated by the glow from the eruption of Kilauea's Halema'uma'u Crater on the horizon far below. Navigating the rock cairns across the lava fields in the dark was certainly a challenge and slowed my progress considerably. Especially early on, the trail-bed isn't particularly clear, so one is largely dependent on following each cairn in succession; but it sometimes took me minutes just to find the next one along the route. After four hours, I had covered the 7.5 miles (12.1 km) to reach Pu'u'u'ula Red Hill Cabin at dawn. The sun rose over Red Hill behind me shortly afterward, and Mauna Kea and its summit observatory then became an omnipresent site on my right for the rest of the hike.



- 1) Field of stars over the glowing eruption of Kilauea's Halema'uma'u Crater from a couple of miles up the trail at about 3:30 am.
- 2) Sunrise over Red Hill, just over four hours into the hike.

Since it was daylight, navigation was much easier on the long 9.5 mile (15.3 km) trek from Red Hill Cabin to the crater rim, but the stage still felt endless. There are a few cinder cones and other landmarks, but the path mainly follows endless lava fields of various colours and consistencies broken by short stretches of sand and some hard-packed snow (almost ice in the morning) nearer to the summit. It also often seems to frustratingly weave through the lava instead of taking a more direct route for the top. Just as the night was clear, I was lucky to have a beautiful, sunny day for my hike. It certainly wasn't warm at elevation though despite the ideal conditions. I wore pants, a jacket and a toque the entire way up and partway back down.

Elevation markers every 1,000 feet at least gave some indication of progress towards the rim of Moku'aweoweo Caldera. Beyond about the 12,000 foot mark I started to feel some effects of the altitude. I was a bit nauseous (and lost my appetite for most of the rest of the trip) and definitely had some shortness of breath. Luckily, the path never gets exceedingly steep and the symptoms didn't particularly worsen beyond that, even at the summit. After thinking I'd reached the crater rim multiple times when cresting undulating hills, I finally sighted the signposts at the trail junction and knew I was closing in. It took me between 7.5 and 8 hours (another 3.5 to 4 hours from Red Hill Cabin) to reach the rim of the enormous, snow-pocked crater.



3) Shot of the trail up lava flows between Red Hill Cabin and the Summit Caldera. 4) Mauna Kea rising to the North on the way to the summit.

After a short rest and some deliberation on whether I had time to reach the summit that day, I decided to give it a go and set off on the 2.6 mile (4.2 km) route around the north and then west side of the crater to the summit. Shortly after, I encountered the only other person I would see on the trail that day coming back from the summit, a guy from Portland who understandably thought I was nuts for attempting the hike in a day. At this point, in addition to Mauna Kea, the peak of Haleakala became visible above the clouds on the horizon to the northwest. The hike to the summit was slowed by the effects of altitude and took longer than expected. Again, I kept thinking I'd reached it, only to crest another small hill and see another string of cairns. I finally reached the summit cairn just after noon in about 9:10 and took a few photos before heading back down. I was too tired and cold to even bother signing the summit register tucked into the cairn. The scale of Moku'aweoweo Caldera from this vantage point is magnificent, and one can only imagine the magnitude of the eruption that created it.





5) Panorama of Moku'aweoweo Caldera from the summit of Mauna Loa.

I knew the way down would be faster, and it needed to be, if I had any hope of making it down the mountain before sunset. Despite lessening during downhill travel, I was still feeling some effects of elevation until I dropped well below 12,000 feet again. From then on though, it became an easy and fast, but tedious slog back down through the lava fields towards Red Hill Cabin. I got back there at about the 13.5 hour mark. There was about 2 hours before sunset, with about 3 hours of hiking still to go. I stopped briefly to use the outhouse, get some water and chat with the hiker I met earlier who was spending the night there, and then set off on the last leg of the journey.



6) The approach to Red Hill Cabin on the descent. 7) Pu'u'ula'ula Red Hill Cabin.

It was really interesting to see the landscape I had traversed in the pitch black earlier that morning. It was totally unfamiliar. It certainly was easier to navigate the rock cairns in daylight, but not as straightforward as it was at higher elevations on the mountain. Although I didn't have the energy to run, I hiked the last leg fairly fast as I raced the setting sun down the mountain. Despite my efforts, I still had to hike the last 20 minutes or so to the trailhead by headlamp. It ended up taking me 15:51 to hike the 39.2 miles round-trip, with the trip down taking around 6 and a half hours (compared to 9:10 on the way up).



8) At the summit of Mauna Loa.

I actually didn't feel too bad when I finished, but the balls of my feet hurt for days afterward from hiking on the unforgiving lava surface. Good hiking boots are definitely a must on the trail no matter how quickly you plan on doing it. Hiking it in a day was extremely challenging and not something I would recommend to anyone unless they're very fit and prepared, but it's something I'm extremely proud to say I've done.

Please send any comments or questions to [stweston@alumni.sfu.ca](mailto:stweston@alumni.sfu.ca).

Cheers, Scott